

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

**1. Name of Property**historic name Beale Streetother names/site number Beale Street Historic District**2. Location**street & number Beale Street, vic. of 2nd Street and to 4th Street☐ not for publicationcity, town Memphis☐ vicinitystate Tennesseecode TNcounty Shelbycode 157zip code 38103**3. Classification**

## Ownership of Property

☒ private☒ public-local☐ public-State☐ public-Federal

## Category of Property

☐ building(s)☒ district☐ site☐ structure☐ object

## Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

Noncontributing

309 buildings

sites

structures

objects

39 Total

Name of related multiple property listing: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of contributing resources previously  
listed in the National Register 39**4. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
☐ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the  
National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.  
In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. ☐ See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

**5. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

☐ entered in the National Register.☐ See continuation sheet.☐ determined eligible for the National  
Register. ☐ See continuation sheet.☐ determined not eligible for the  
National Register.☐ removed from the National Register.☐ other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store/restaurant  
RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater  
RECREATION AND CULTURE/music facility  
COMMERCE/TRADE/financial institution

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store/restaurant  
COMMERCE/TRADE/business and professional

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th Century and 20th Century Revivals  
Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century  
American Movements

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

walls brick

roof \_\_\_\_\_

other \_\_\_\_\_

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Several distinct sections characterized Beale Street at the turn of the century. East Beale Street was residential in character; many fine homes were built at that end. The western end of the street, where it meets the Mississippi River, was primarily commercial. The central part of the street housed saloons and other places of entertainment, and at one time was known as "the underworld."

When the Beale Street Historic District was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, the district boundaries were established along Beale Street between Main and Fourth Streets. These boundaries encompassed the area along the central section of Beale Street where, in 1965, the greatest number of structures in the historic entertainment district predating 1938 survived. By 1965, the street's western end, where it meets the Mississippi, was no longer an active waterfront. Mud Island had been built up to block off the channels of navigation, and dock facilities had been moved farther north. Most of the original Beale Street mansions at its eastern end had given way to buildings of a later vintage.

By 1965, the central section of Beale Street had also been altered over the years. The activities that caused this neighborhood to be known as the "underworld" had already changed considerably. In 1933 the Memphis Police Department made a serious drive against bootlegging and vice of all descriptions on the famous street, at a time when the nation was voting prohibition into oblivion. Early in July, 1933, vigorous law enforcement drove Beale Street's bootleggers and gamblers out of business. By 1938, Beale Street's initial flowering as a center of night life had lost much of its vigor.

Subsequently, the problems that have affected most U.S. inner cities in the years after World War II also afflicted Memphis. By the mid-1960s, some of Beale Street's historic buildings were vacant or no longer served their original purposes. In the block between Third and Hernando Streets, an old market had disappeared from the north side of the street. Handy Park, an open, tree-shaded square named in honor of W.C. Handy, already stood in its place. The market house was razed in the 1920's and replaced by a park; shortly after Handy died in 1958, it was redeveloped and named in his honor.

Nonetheless, the district in 1966 still retained a significant number of historic buildings related to the most important era of Beale Street's days as an urban entertainment district. In that year, approximately 50% of the buildings in the district survived from the Handy era, with the largest concentration between Second and Fourth

## 8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

☒ nationally ☐ statewide ☐ locally

Applicable National Register Criteria ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D ☐ E ☐ F ☐ G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Music: Jazz and Popular (National Historic  
Landmark themes XXII C. and D.)

Period of Significance

1905-1938

Significant Dates

Cultural Affiliation

Significant Person

William Christopher Handy

Architect/Builder

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Beale Street's entertainment district is an important site in the history of the blues, that influential musical form which has had an impact on American rock, jazz, pop, and symphonic music. Beale Street played a major role in the career of W. C. Handy. Handy's works brought the blues to new heights of general popularity, and made him a preeminent figure in the establishment of composed blues as a form of American popular song.<sup>1</sup> While working in Memphis from 1905 to 1917 or 1918, Handy wrote songs such as the "Memphis Blues" and "St. Louis Blues" that gained a wide audience. On Beale Street was the headquarters for Handy's band. At least once, he rented a room on Beale Street to avoid distractions while he worked on his music. Though Handy left Memphis for Chicago and New York City around 1917 or 1918, Beale Street continued, into the years of the Great Depression, to represent important facets of a time and milieu in which the blues began to exert a major influence in the history of mainstream American music.

In addition to its importance as a traditional form of musical expression, the blues as a musical form has made important contributions to the broader field of American popular music. As one popular survey of American music puts it:

Besides being a type of folk song in their own right, and later a form of American popular music, the blues were a means of effecting the transition of Afro-American "hot" music from the vocal to the instrumental realm through the medium of piano blues and the jazz band. The blues are therefore of far-reaching significance in the development of American music.<sup>2</sup>

Blues forms and inflections were among the influences on the early development of jazz. They also provided a touchstone for certain jazz performers during the late 1950s and 1960s who sought to recapture the emotional impact of early jazz roots in folk traditions. They have had continuing influence on other forms of popular music in America, as well as on more academic compositions such as those of George Gershwin.

In 1909 Memphis was in the midst of a three-cornered campaign to elect a mayor. Memphis believed in the value of musical advertising, and so each candidate had a band to put spirit into his campaign. Handy's band was beating the drum for E. H.

1. Gilbert Chase, America's Music (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), p. 457.

2. Ibid., p. 449.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Please see continuation sheet.

☒ See continuation sheet

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☒ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☒ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

### Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State historic preservation office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☒ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

### Specify repository:

Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development

## 10. Geographical Data

Acres of property approx. 27

### UTM References

A 1,5 7,6,8,9,2,0 3,8,9,2,4,8,0  
Zone Easting Northing

C 1,5 7,6,8,3,6,0 3,8,9,2,1,6,0

B 1,5 7,6,8,8,6,0 3,8,9,2,0,6,0  
Zone Easting Northing

D 1,5 7,6,8,4,2,0 3,8,9,2,5,8,0

☐ See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

☒ See continuation sheet

### Boundary Justification

☒ See continuation sheet

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Cecil McKithan, Chief, National Register Programs Div./Horace Sheely, Historian  
organization NPS Southeast Region/NPS Historic Sites Survey date 1988/1966  
street & number 75 Spring Street, SW telephone (404) 331-5185  
city or town Atlanta state Georgia zip code 30303

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Streets. Another 25% survived from the 1919-1938 period. The building that had housed Peewee's still stood, as did the old Panama Club building. Former buildings of the Monarch Club, the "Hole in the Wall", Hammitt Ashford's Saloon, and Sims' Beer Garden also remained, although they were vacant or used for business activities other than the original ones.

The Memphis Housing Authority initiated a redevelopment project at Beale Street in the mid-1960s, and consulted the National Register staff about their plans. In subsequent years, all historic buildings between Main and Second Streets, with the exception of Lansky Men's Fashions, were demolished and new construction completed in this area. A new Tri-State Bank of Memphis building was constructed at the corner of Main and Beale Streets. Mulberry Street, which intersected Beale Street between Main and Second, was eliminated. Fronting on Main Street and facing Beale Street was constructed a new Memphis Light, Gas, and Water Building. As a result, the area between Main and Second, with the exception of Lansky Men's Fashions, is proposed for removal from the Landmark district. A new road known as Handy Circle was built in the area between Second and Fourth Streets, and then later removed. Its construction resulted in demolition of several historic structures, including Pee Wee's. It also brought about the closing of historic Hernando Street, which has since been reopened. In addition, the city of Memphis relocated in the district a wood-frame shotgun-style house that was reportedly among W.C. Handy's residences while he lived in Memphis.

Remaining buildings from the historic period, while they vary in architectural significance and physical condition, contribute to an understanding of the environment known by Handy and described in his "Beale Street Blues." Many of the earlier existing buildings were the product of master masons and builders who were guided by standard manuals in matters of spatial design, structural elements, and facade ornamentation. The results were as individualistic as their builders but harmonized in fundamentals of pattern, ornament, and materials. Later buildings exhibited more stylistic eclecticism and were constructed with cheaper materials.

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Classification

BUILDING STATUS  
SECOND TO THIRD

138 Beale	Contributing:	Scheduled for Stabilization
139 Beale	Contributing:	Restored
140 Beale	Contributing:	Scheduled for Stabilization
142-44 Beale	Contributing:	Scheduled for Stabilization
143 Beale	Contributing:	Shell Restored
147 Beale	Non-Contributing:	Due to Treatment of Storefront by Shopstead Developer
149 Beale	Contributing:	Continuing Stabilization
146-152 Beale	Contributing:	Restored
151-155 Beale	Contributing:	Scheduled for Stabilization
154-156 Beale	Contributing:	Scheduled for Stabilization
159-161 Beale	Non-Contributing	Facade was Modernized in 1950s and Fairly 1960s Prior to Project
162-164 Beale	Contributing:	Epstein Law Office
163-165 Beale	Contributing:	
166 Beale	Contributing:	
168 Beale	Contributing:	
167-169 Beale	Contributing:	
170-172 Beale	Non-Contributing:	
171-173 Beale	Historic Facade:	
174 Beale	Contributing:	

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176-178 Beale	Contributing:	
175 Beale	Historic Facade:	
177-181 Beale	Historic Facade:	
183 Beale	Contributing:	Massive Stabilization Effort Necessary to Preserve Status
182 -184 Beale	Contributing:	
<u>Third and Hernando and Fourth</u>		
197 Beale	Historic Facade:	(New Construction Behind)
199-201 Beale	Historic Facade:	(New Construction Behind)
203 Beale	Non-Contributing:	May be Eligible for Historic Facade if Window Sash and Storefront Restored to Masonry Openings.
205 Beale	Contributing:	
207-209 Beale	Contributing:	
323-327 Beale	Non-Contributing:	New Construction
326-328 Beale	Contributing:	Restored
329-331 Beale	Contributing:	Restored
330 Beale	Contributing:	Restored
333-337 Beale	Non-contributing	New Construction
339-343 Beale	Non-contributing	New Construction
338 Beale	Contributing	Restored
340 Beale	Contributing	
345-347 Beale	Non-contributing	New Construction
Handy House	Non-contributing	

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Crump. For this purpose, Handy composed a special campaign tune, but without words. Impromptu remarks of the crowds and members of the band provided the basis for the lyrics which were added. Peewee's Saloon on Beale Street served as headquarters for Handy's band for a time. In the fall of 1909, Handy often used the cigar stand there to write out copies of the "Mr. Crump" lyric for visiting bands. This campaign tune was afterwards published under the title "Memphis Blues" and became the first of the blues to be published.

Handy was deprived of the financial profit and full recognition that should have come to him from the success of the "Memphis Blues." He was determined to compose a successor and it occurred to him that he could make more progress away from the confusion which his children created at home, so he rented a room in the Beale Street section and went to work. When the song was completed, Handy christened it the "St. Louis Blues." The same day on Peewee's cigar stand he orchestrated the number and jotted down scores for the Handy band. Sigmund Spaeth in his history of popular music in America states that historically, and perhaps musically as well, the most important piece of popular music published in 1914 was W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues."

Beale Street was also a home of the blues in a less direct way. It provided an environment and backdrop from which urban blues drew inspiration. Like other Mississippi River-basin towns, notably New Orleans and St. Louis, Memphis had employment opportunities that created a permanent community where Afro-American musical traditions flourished.<sup>3</sup> At one end of the Street is the Mississippi River, with its traditions of steamboats and roustabouts. On Beale Street, golden balls identified numerous pawn shops, vendors stretched their racks of clothing across the store fronts, and glib-tongued barkers called to passers-by to come in and view the bargains; laughter and song rang out from the cafes and dance halls and electric pianos joined with the traffic noise.

This was an environment that gave birth to urban blues. The golden balls of pawn shops which Handy mentions in his lyrics for "Beale Street Blues" were heavily concentrated between Main and Third Streets along Beale Street. Entertainment centered on the short block from Hernando to Fourth Street. Here was the heart of a gay and raucous night life. On this block Peewee's place was started in 1894 by Vigelio Maffi Peewee. In Peewee's, piano players, guitar players, and musicians of all descriptions liked to gather. It was in such an atmosphere that Handy heard many of the things that went into his blues. The 300 block was crowded with other saloons. A few doors from Hernando on Beale was the notorious Hole in the Wall--a narrow building with a brown front. Gambling was a specialty there. The Monarch Club was opened in 1910 in the middle of the north side of the block. It was one of the finest clubs in the South in its appointments and housed Beale Street's most famous gambling den in its rear section. The Panama Club occupied a three-story red brick building at Beale and Fourth, and the club's owner was generally viewed as an

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3. Ibid., p. 434.



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influential figure in Beale Street's underworld life. The most ancient and superb of all the saloons on Beale Street was Hammitt Ashford's, a two-story brown building on the southeast corner of Beale and Fourth.

Theaters held an important place in the life of Beale Street. The largest showhouse for blacks in the South was the Palace Theater on Beale. It was famous for its traditional Tuesday night amateur shows. The old Pastime, opened in 1909, was the first theater for blacks on Beale Street. The first Beale Street theater established by black capital was the Lincoln, between Hernando and Fourth Streets.

In this setting, William Christopher Handy played a key role at the beginning of the era when the blues became a form of music popular and imitated across the country. His activities while on Beale Street included composition of some of his major songs. Beale Street's history as an entertainment district that nurtured Handy and other musicians continued into the years of the Great Depression, although the district's night life was losing some of its vibrancy. Therefore, the historic period of the Beale Street National Historic Landmark encompasses both the period when Handy was active on Beale Street and the era following his departure until 1938.

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Works Consulted

Chase, Gilbert. America's Music. 2nd ed., rev. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966.

Fox, Jesse W. "Beale Street and the Blues." The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers XIII (1959).

Goldberg, Isaac. Tin Pan Alley; A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket. New York: 1930.

Handy, William Christopher. Father of the Blues: An Autobiography. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941.

Handy, William Christopher, ed. A Treasury of the Blues. New York: Charles Boni and Simon and Schuster, 1949.

Lee, George W. Beale Street, Where the Blues Began. New York: 1934.

Memphis Housing Authority. "Beale Street USA, Where the Blues Began." Memphis: n.d.

Spaeth, Sigmund. A History of Popular Music in America. New York: Random House, 1948.

Thompson, Oscar, ed. The International Cyclopedia of Music in America. New York: 1964.

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Boundary Adjustment

The boundary of Beale Street Historic District shall consist of Lansky Men's Fashions as well as the area on Beale Street between Second and Fourth Streets from the South curb of McCall street to the North curb of Lt. Lee Avenue. The specific boundary delineation is listed below.

Beginning at the point of intersection of a line Ten Feet (10') west of and parallel to the east R.O.W. of South Second Street, same being the line of the face of the east curb of South Second Street, and a line Ten Feet (10') south of and parallel to the north R.O.W. of Beale Street, and continuing in a southward direction along said east curb line of South Second Street to a point of intersection with a line Ten Feet (10') south of and parallel to the north R.O.W. of Lt. George W. Lee Avenue, same being the line of the face of north curb of the Lt. George W. Lee Avenue.

Thence eastward along said north curb line of Lt. George W. Lee Avenue to its point of intersection with the centerline of South Third Street.

Thence eastward along north curb line of Lt. George W. Lee (1987 alignment) to its intersection with a line Ten Feet (10') east of and parallel to the west R.O.W. of Fourth Street, same being the line of face of west curb of Fourth Street.

Thence northward along said west curb line of Fourth Street to a point of intersection with a line Ten Feet (10') north of a parallel to the south R.O.W. of McCall Avenue (1987 alignment), same being the line of face of south curb of McCall Avenue.

Thence westward along said south curb line of McCall Avenue to a point of intersection with a line Ten Feet (10') west of and parallel to the east R.O.W. of South Third Street, same being the line of face of east curb of South Third Street.

Thence southward along said east curb line to a point of intersection with a line being the extension of the south R.O.W. of east-west alley north of Beale Street, same being the line of face of south curb of said east-west alley.

Thence westward along said curb line to its point of intersection with a line Ten Feet (10') west of and parallel to the east R.O.W. of South Second Street, same being the line of face of east curb of South Second Street.

Thence northward along said curb line to a point of intersection with an east-west line, being the extension of the north property line of Parcel 12 of assessor's block number 49.

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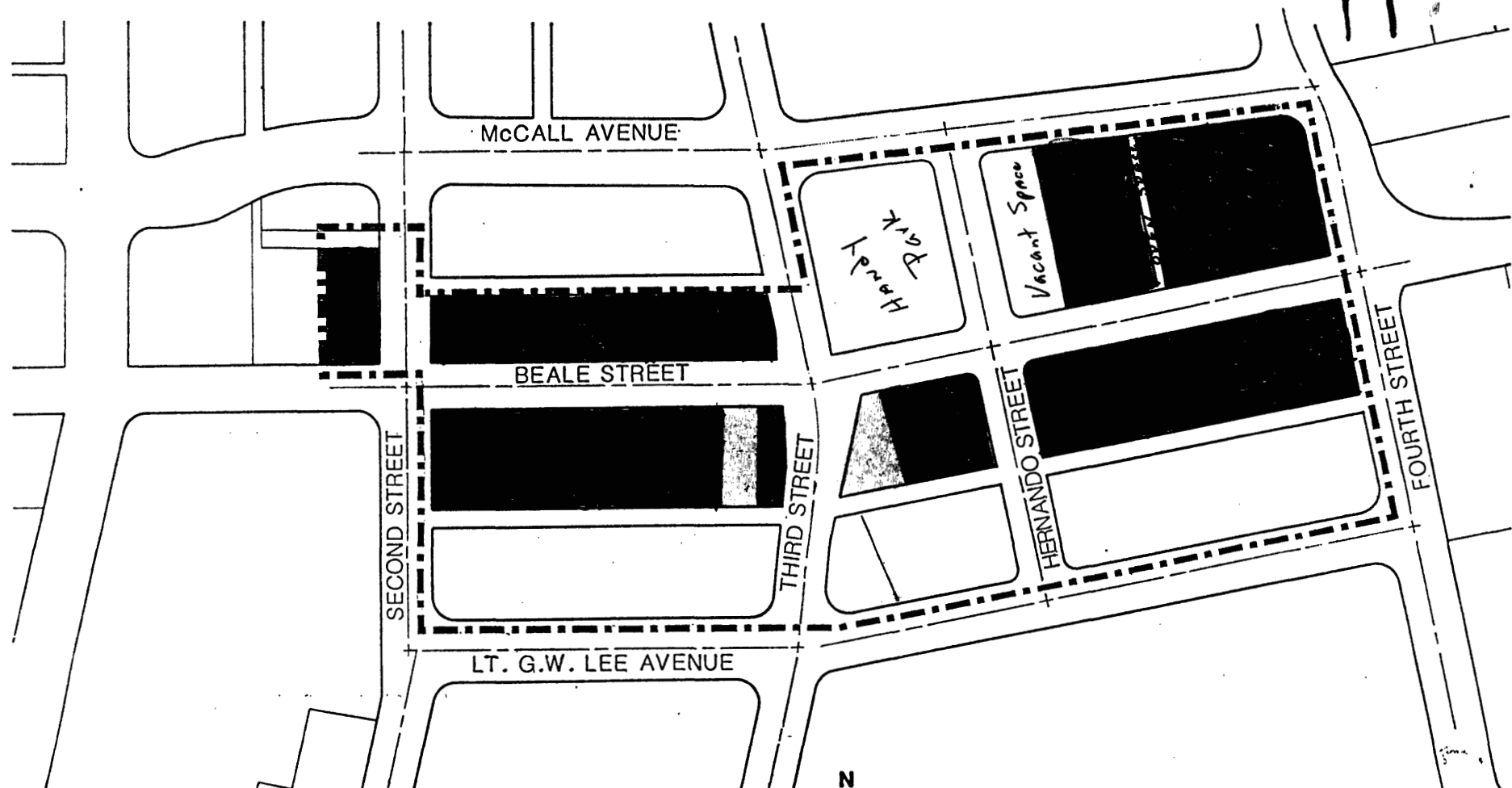
Thence westward along said north property line to a point of intersection with a line, being the extension of the west property line of Parcel 16 of assessor's block number 49.

Thence southward along said west property line to a point of intersection with a line, Ten Feet (10') south of and parallel to the north R.O.W. of Beale Street, same being the line of face of north curb of Beale Street.

Thence eastward along said curb line to the point of beginning.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

Boundary encompasses the area of Beale Street's historic entertainment district with a significant concentration of pre-1938 buildings.



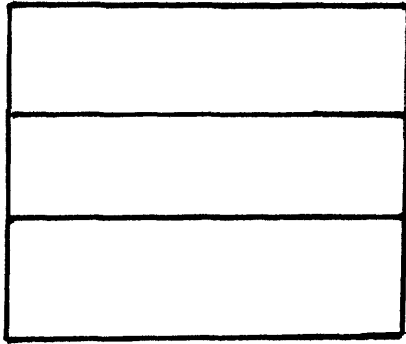
Contributing  
Non-Contributing  
Historic Façade



BEALE STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT  
PROPOSED BOUNDARY  
09-03-87

Main to Second Street  
1966

Street



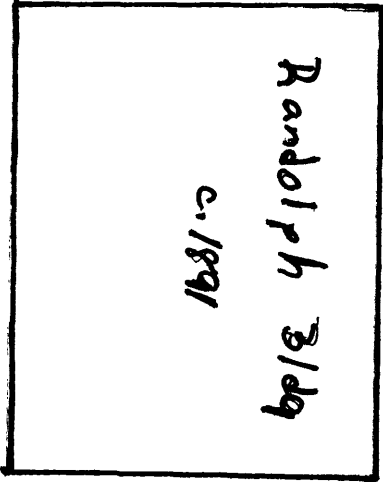
ALLEY



Street

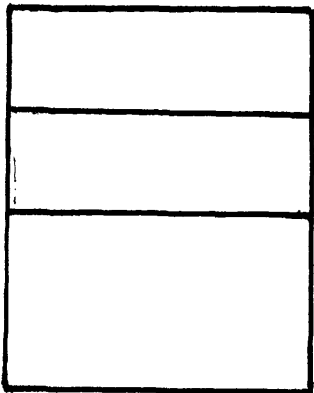


MAIN



Beale Street

Mulberry Street



Second

Main to Second Street  
1967

Street

TRI- State Bank

Alley

Lanky  
Men's Fashions

Street



Beale Street

Elvis Presley  
Plaza

new

MAIN

Second

Memphis Light, Gas and  
Water Bldg.

Second

Street

139
141
143
145
147
149
151-155
157
159-161
163
165
167-169
171-173
175
177
179
181
183

Beale Street

138
140
142
144
146-152
154-156
158-160
162-164
166
168
170-172
174
176-178
182-184

Second to Third  
1966

Third

Street





Present

Condition

Second

Street

Tax Act Project-Rehabed	139
Tax Act Rehabed	143
Can be used	147
	149
Deteriorated	151-155
Bldg demolished	Vacant Space
	New Police Station
	163
	165
	Deteriorated
	Deteriorated
	Facade only
	Facade only
	Facade only
	Deteriorated

Back Street

138	Deteriorated
140	Deteriorated
142	Deteriorated
144	Deteriorated
146-152	Bldg. gutted and rehabed } Tax Act Project
154-156	Badly deteriorated
	Demolished
162-164	Rehabilitation
166	Rehabilitation
168	Rehabilitation
170-172	Rehabilitation Only Facade remains
174	Rehabilitation
176-178	Rehabilitation
182-184	In Use

Third

Street



Third Street

Beale Street

Street

Hernando

Handy  
Park

Present  
Appearance  
1986

Total  
→  
Reconstruction  
only facade  
remained

197

Reconstruction  
only facade  
remained

199-201

New  
Construction →

Original Bldg  
demolished  
203

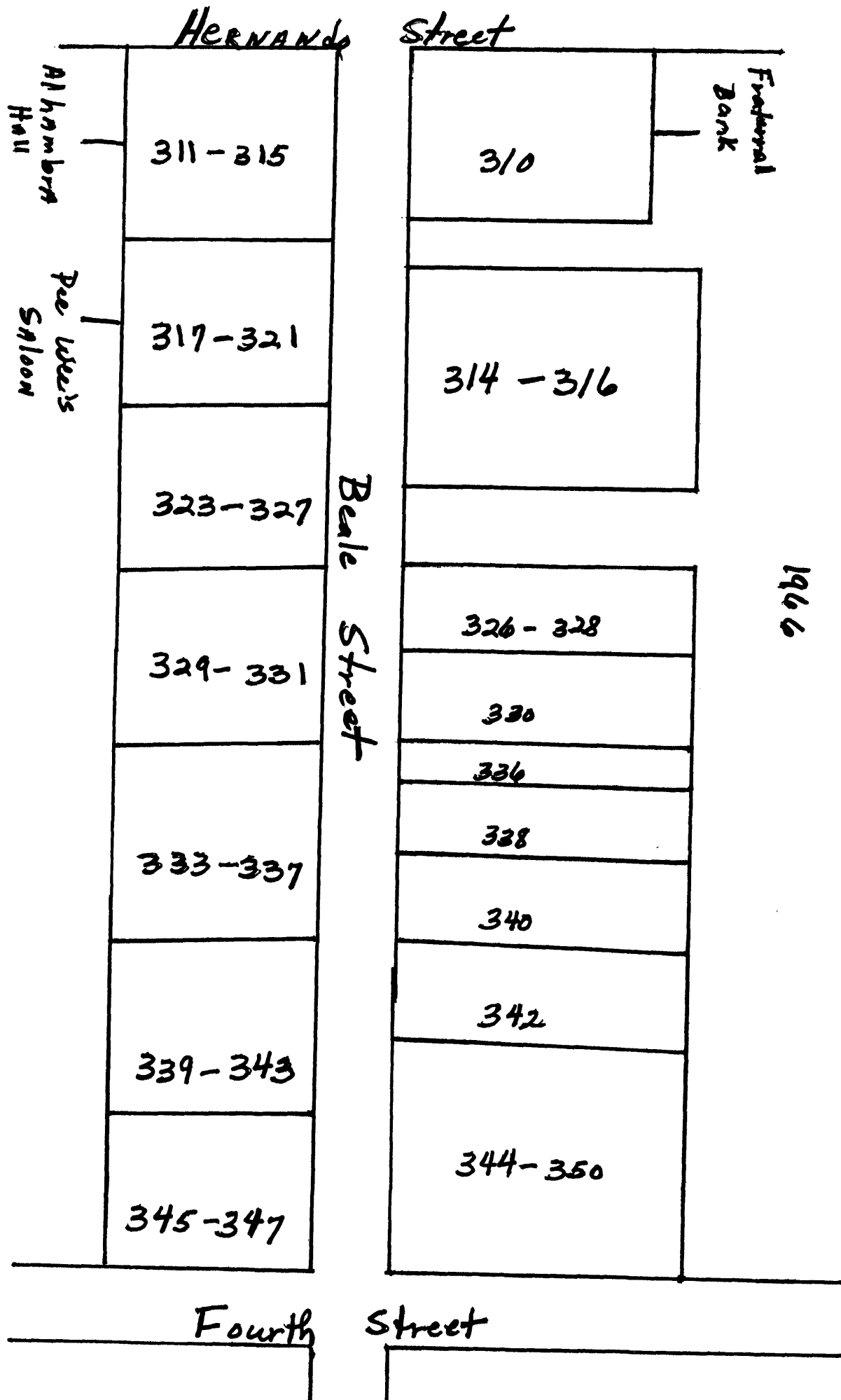
Historic  
Bldg. →

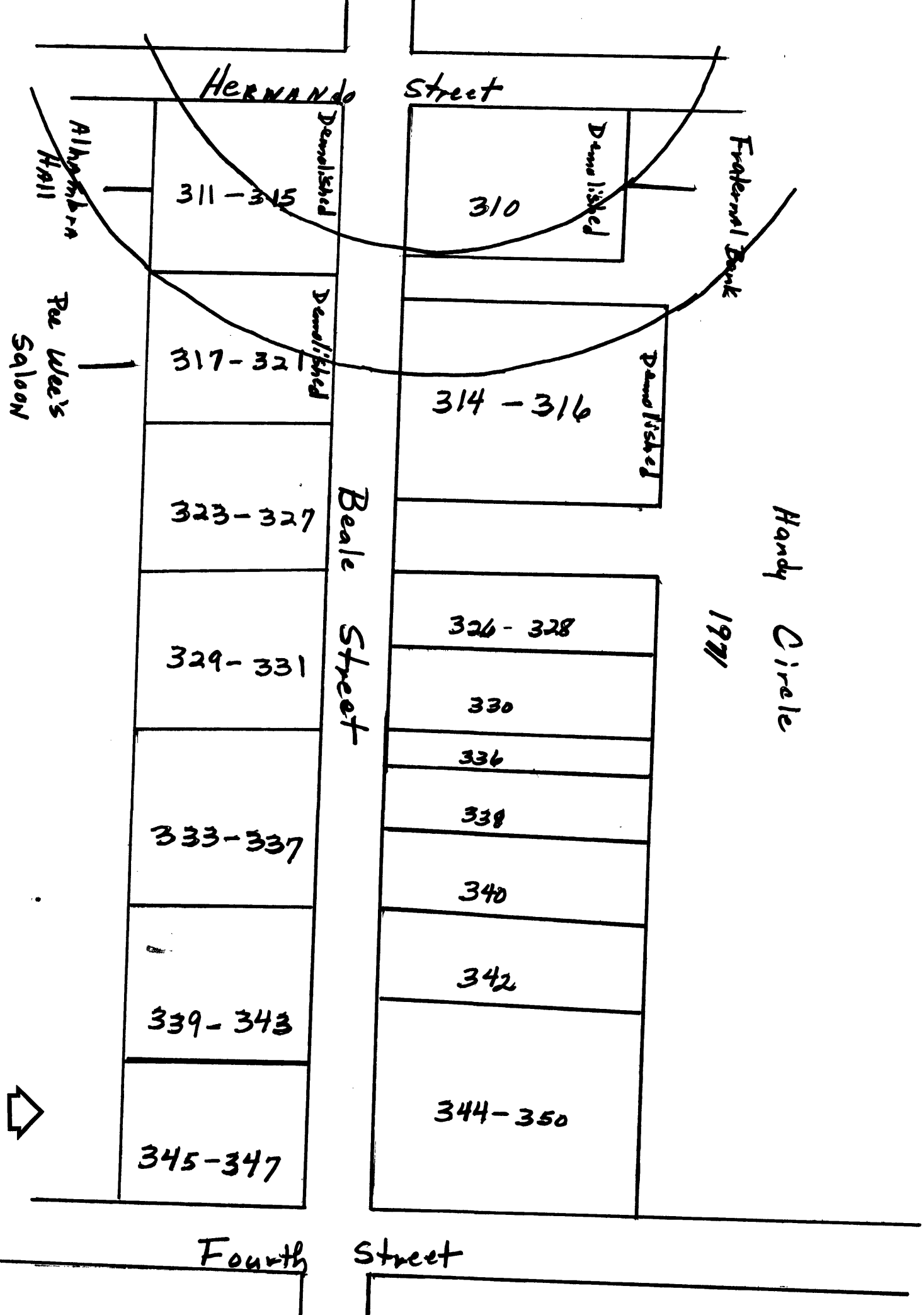
205

Historic  
Bldg. →

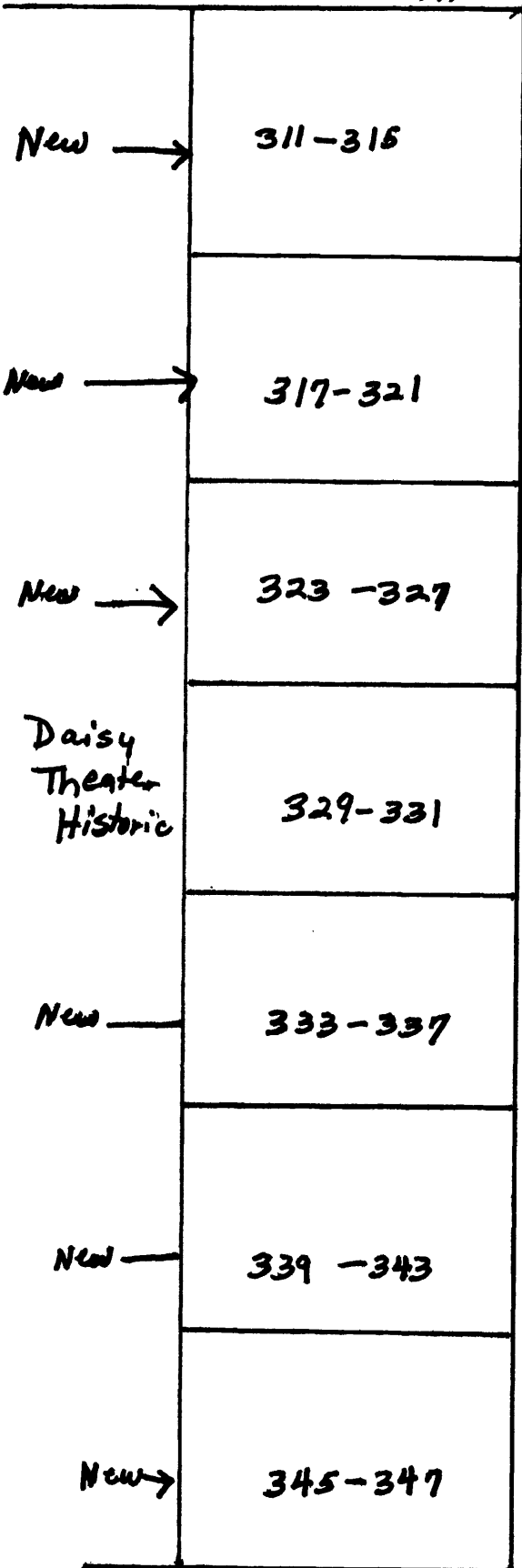
207-209



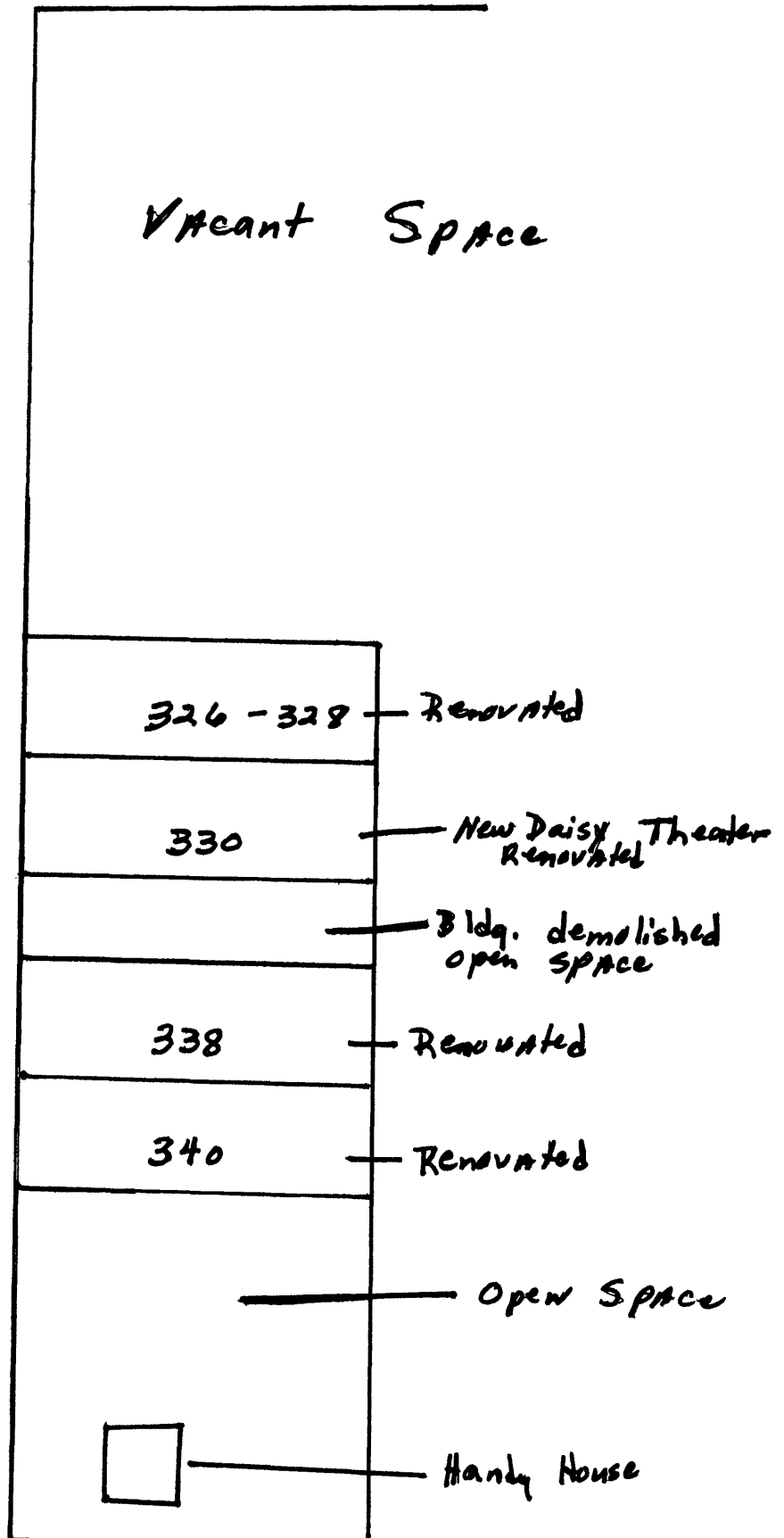




Hernando Street



Beale Street



Fourth Street

